"We stryve as dide the houndes for the boon": Animals and Chaucer's Romance Vision

"We stryve as dide the houndes for the boon": Animals and Chaucer's Romance Vision

David Salter
University of Edinburgh

In this essay, I will examine two brief episodes from *The Knight's Tale* to explore how Chaucer makes use of the comic potential of animals in order to reflect upon the complex and multifarious nature of romantic love. My interest here is not with Chaucer's attitudes toward animals per se; in both of the episodes I will discuss, he draws on highly conventional and proverbial ideas about the animals concerned, which he accepts without question. Rather, focusing on just a couple of passages, I will examine how Chaucer deploys received opinions about animals as a way of opening up new and complicating perspectives on what is perhaps the central concern not just of *The Knight's Tale* itself but of all romance: the resolutely human predicament of being in love. In this way, my focus will be on the way in which the distinctive use of animals in *The Knight's Tale* can shed some light on Chaucer's characteristic attitude toward the genre of romance.

The first of these incidents occurs immediately after the tale's two protagonists, Palamon and Arcite, have fallen in love at first sight with Emelye, whom they both observe from their shared prison cell, as she is gathering flowers in her garden one May morning. During the bitter argument that ensues, as the two knights hotly dispute their competing claims for Emelye, Arcite momentarily appears to adopt a more measured and realistic appraisal of their chances of winning her love:

> And eek it is nat likly al thy lyf
> To stonden in hir grace; namoore shal I;
> For wel thou woost thyselven, verraily,
> That thou and I be dampned to prisoun

Studies in the Age of Chaucer 34 (2012):339–44

> Perpetuelly; us gayneth no raunsoun.
> We stryve as dide the houndes for the boon;
> They foughte al day, and yet hir part was noon.
> Ther cam a kyte, whil that they were so wrothe,
> And baar awey the boon bitwixe hem bothe.
> And therfore, at the kynges court, my brother,
> Ech man for hymself, ther is noon oother.
> Love, if thee list, for I love and ay shal;
> And soothly, leeve brother, this is al.
> Heere in this prisoun moote we endure,
> And everich of us take his aventure.
>
> (I.1172–86)

Here Arcite takes a step back from the intensity of his quarrel with Palamon to offer—through the medium of the briefest of beast fables—a moral commentary on his and his cousin's unhappy predicament. This opens up a radical new perspective on the sudden eruption of conflict between the two knights, who unexpectedly find themselves rivals for Emelye's love. Having both fallen in love with Emelye, the knights level ferocious accusations and recriminations against each other, briefly yielding to a moment of clarity and insight as Arcite becomes aware of just how absurd it is for two prisoners, sentenced to perpetual captivity, to argue over a woman who lives beyond their prison walls, and who is ignorant of their very existence. It is the absurdity of this situation that then suggests to Arcite the exemplary fable of the two dogs arguing over a bone.

The analogy of course is far from flattering for the two knights, for at one and the same time it would seem to reduce them to the level of beasts, and to demean and belittle their romantic attachment—the ennobling love that romance conventionally celebrates—to the level of mere animal appetite. However, it is worth noting that the beast fable that Arcite briefly recounts is one whose moral he does not, or perhaps cannot, follow. Rather than accepting the moral logic of the narrative and dismissing his longing for Emelye as either futile or worthless or both, Arcite chooses to draw a different conclusion, reading into the fable the inevitability of human conflict in the pursuit of individual self-interest. So instead of seeking to reform himself, or at least amend his behavior by reflecting on the exemplary animal tale, Arcite implicitly acknowledges his own animal nature. And then having accepted, as it

were, the beast within himself, he concludes his comments in the manner of a typical romance protagonist, by submitting to the spirit of chance or *aventure,* presumably in the hope that, like the archetypal heroes of romance, he will experience a reversal of fortunes and achieve his desired goals.

On one level, this analogy between knightly protagonists and canine scavengers accords with the deeply pessimistic interpretation of the human condition to which *The Knight's Tale* gives such sustained expression. Palamon and Arcite are repeatedly overwhelmed by seething, animalistic passions that they are powerless to control. Particularly when they are engaging in physical combat, the bestial is forever bursting through the veneer of their human civility, paralyzing or at least sabotaging their ability to act rationally. For instance, when fighting in the wooded grove outside Athens toward the end of the second part of the tale, Palamon is compared to a "wood leon" (1656), Arcite to a "crueel tigre" (1657), and the two collectively to "wilde bores" (1658), and these images, and variations on them, recur throughout the narrative. Within the tale, it is the figure of Theseus who seeks to resist these irrational, entropic forces that are constantly threatening to plunge the action into chaos. Theseus attempts to contain and control the knights' brutality and irrationality by insisting that they conduct and mediate their conflict through the civilizing institution of chivalry. One of the ways in which the tale has traditionally been read is in terms of this tension between order and chaos: between the civilizing, socially ameliorating efforts of Theseus and the knights' animalistic passions, which are forever breaking out of the civilizing straitjacket that Theseus seeks to impose on them.

But rather than exploring the ways in which Chaucer uses animals to reflect upon the human condition, what I would like to do in this brief essay is examine what animals can tell us about his understanding of, and his attitudes toward, the genre of romance. If we return, once again, to Arcite's miniature beast fable, what is perhaps worth noting is how, for Arcite—and presumably for Chaucer as well—the comical and the absurd can exist alongside the serious and the morally earnest. The image of two dogs fighting over a bone that ultimately eludes them both, captures on one level the ridiculousness of the knights' predicament, but the comical perspective that it opens up complicates but does not negate the intensity and the seriousness of their feelings for Emelye. And this mixture of emotions and registers, the combination of the in-

tense, the serious, and the comical, is highly characteristic of Chaucer's romance vision. It is evident in that same scene in the wooded grove, where Palamon and Arcite are metaphorically transformed into wild beasts while fighting. Their deadly combat is interrupted by the arrival of Theseus, who having been persuaded to grant the two clemency after initially condemning them to death, then reflects in an extended speech, which he milks for all of its comic potential, upon the universal folly of lovers. And while the speech is too long to quote in its entirety, it is worth considering a short passage from it:

> But this is yet the beste game of alle,
> That she for whom they han this jolitee
> Kan hem therfore as muche thank as me.
> She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
> By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!
> But all moot ben assayed, hoot and coold;
> A man moot ben a fool, or yong or oold—
> I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
> For in my tyme a servant {of the God of Love} was I oon.
> And therfore, syn I knowe of loves peyne
> And woot hou soore it kan a man distreyne,
> As he that hath ben caught ofte in his laas,
> I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas . . .
>
> (I.1806–18)

It is striking just how swiftly the trajectory of the narrative moves from the single-minded intensity of Palamon and Arcite's mortal combat, through the swift dispatch of Theseus's sentence of execution, to his comic reflection on the lovers' folly, which he recognizes as a universal human phenomenon and that becomes the basis for his show of mercy. The shift in tone from the potentially tragic (with the threat of death hanging over the knights) to the comic is reflected in the narrative's abrupt change in register. What is at first presented as a bitter battle to the death, with the protagonists fighting up to their ankles in blood, comes to be characterized by Theseus in humorous and much more colloquial language as a "jolitee" and "hoote fare." Significantly, to accentuate the absurdity of the scene, Theseus employs a couple of comically deflating and seemingly unromantic images drawn from the animal kingdom: according to Theseus, Emelye is as ignorant as a cuckoo or a

hare of the knights' existential struggle to win her love.[1] Just as the two hounds fighting over the bone appeared to be at odds with the serious tone one might expect of courtly romance, so a cuckoo and a hare, proverbial for their foolishness and madness, would seem to be singularly inapposite animals to compare to a courtly lady such as Emelye, who elsewhere in the tale is treated with the utmost reverence and seriousness. When writing about this passage, Beryl Rowland notes that "the lapse from high style to homely colloquialism" that is reflected in the comparison "contributes a flippancy to [Theseus's] speech, which is consistent with his down-to-earth character."[2] But one could argue that it is not just flippancy that Theseus exhibits here. Rather, it can be seen as a mature ability to recognize the absurdity in extreme passion, even as it responds to the knights' very serious investment in their passionate desire. Unlike tragedy, which relies—at least in its more extreme forms—on a uniform high seriousness of tone, it is a defining feature of romance that it is capable of incorporating multiple, and here diametrically opposed perspectives, on the same character or action, without either negating the other.

In the two vignettes I have briefly examined, the comparisons that Chaucer draws between the human and animal worlds would seem deliberately to be made to the detriment of his human characters. In the socially conservative, highly class-conscious milieu of medieval romance, where the animal kingdom was thought to reflect the hierarchies of human society, beasts such as kites, cuckoos, and hares were regarded as plebeian in nature, and so hardly fitting creatures to be compared to the aristocratic protagonists of the genre. Even the two hounds, although traditionally considered fit companions for romance's knightly protagonists, are used as part of the poem's broader strategy of reduction and deflation. Chaucer's use of animals in these two instances enables him to introduce and consolidate the theme of folly into his explorations of erotic desire. Throughout the tale, just as we find in Chaucer's romances more generally, folly—along with the comic situations that arise from it—is treated not only as a defining feature of the

[1] The editors of *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), note that some manuscripts have a variant reading of this line, substituting the phrase "than woot a cukkow *of* an hare" for "than woot a cukkow *or* an hare." Whichever reading we choose, the effect of the line remains the same, puncturing the high seriousness of the situation with the intrusion of the low and the comical.

[2] Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1971), 95.

male hero but also as a universal and unavoidable attribute of the human condition. In a way that could be said to anticipate Shakespeare's comedies two centuries later, Chaucer's romances have a breadth and complexity of vision that are able to encompass and integrate startlingly different perspectives, moods, and emotions concerning what it feels like and what it means to be in love. And reflecting the practice of so many late medieval writers, Chaucer can be seen to articulate human truths about the nature of love through animal comparisons.